

IS MATRIARCHY THE ANSWER? A STUDY OF ROKEYA HOSSAIN'S *SULTANA'S DREAM* AND NAOMI ALDERMAN'S *THE POWER*

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ABSTRACT

*Matriarchy has long been seen as the first solution that comes to mind when one thinks of feminism overthrowing patriarchy, but is matriarchy desirable? To understand the nature and possible effects of matriarchy, the present research paper undertakes a close reading of two literary works centred around matriarchy overthrowing and replacing patriarchy - the short story *Sultana's Dream* by Rokeya Hossain, and the novel *The Power* by Naomi Alderman. The present paper is a humble attempt to understand the term 'matriarchy', which can be elaborated on the basis of the theories of feminist utopia. In the story *Sultana's Dream*, the men are pushed into the purdah system and locked up in mardanas - can this be looked upon as a matriarchal move? Also, in the novel *The Power*, the women use their newfound electrical powers to abuse men, force them into silence and submission, and exercise overall control over them - can this, too, be looked upon as matriarchy overturning patriarchy? Further, it observes the close connection between religion and patriarchy in both the works, to show how matriarchy as a power system would affect the world. However, the present study takes into consideration the corrupting nature of power in both the worlds of patriarchy and matriarchy with reference to the selected literary pieces. Finally, the research paper concludes with the understanding that matriarchy doesn't liberate women from patriarchy. A feminist utopia isn't the only answer to achieve the status of utopia. So if either matriarchy, or feminist utopias are the sole solutions to liberation from patriarchy, will the quest for a utopian society remain unanswered, or will it be further explored?*

KEYWORDS: Corrupting Nature, Feminist Utopia, Liberation, Matriarchy

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1. INTRODUCTION

Feminism is the advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes (Lexico, n.d.). It is a social and political movement aiming to define, establish, and achieve this equality on political, economic, personal, and social levels (Wikipedia). The imbalance of power due to a patriarchal set-up is a long-standing issue that feminism fights, and at some point, yearns to reverse, too. To overthrow patriarchy is one thing, but the first solution that comes to mind then is its reversal — matriarchy. Matriarchy is a system of society or government ruled by women (Lexico, n.d.). But what would such a world be like? This can be seen in two particular works: Rokeya Hossain's short story *Sultana's Dream*, and Naomi Alderman's novel *The Power*.

Sultana's Dream is a feminist utopian story written in 1905 by the Muslim feminist Rokeya Hossain, the influence of which is seen in this story (Wikipedia, n.d.). This story talks about 'Ladyland' where women run everything and men are secluded in a purdah system of sorts. Gender stereotypes like men having bigger brains and women being naturally weak are contested with statements like an elephant having a bigger brain and a lion being stronger than man, yet neither trying to dominate humans. Here, the women's world runs on sci-fi-like electrical technology that helps control the weather, avoid labour, and allows for flying cars. Throughout all this, the men are

locked away, so ‘crime has been eliminated as men were considerably responsible for it’. Work hours have been reduced from 6 to 2, because the 6 hours allowed men to smoke. The religion is of truth and love, with purity being the most sacred value.

The Power is a sci-fi novel published in 2016, written by the British Naomi Alderman (Wikipedia, n.d.). The novel talks about an imagined history where women develop the ability to release electrical jolts from their fingers, thus making them the dominant gender. In a patriarchal world, they use this new power to protect themselves from male assaulters, become religious leaders, set up training camps, start military groups, and silence any male opposers. The effects of this new power emerging across the world are explored through the lives of various characters - Roxy, Tunde, Margot, Jocelyn, and Allie. Of course, this revolution is met with counter-forces from men, which get suppressed even through a rogue mass killing of men. Finally, the world is taken all the way back to the Stone Age, from where the world is made to grow with matriarchal set-ups. Thus, the world ends up woman-dominated, but that doesn’t mean it’s a rosy picture: men are sexually harassed, oppressed, abused, and so on by the women and their electrical power. It’s the same world of oppression and gender-based abuse seen around in patriarchy, but just with women at a position of power instead.

As we can see through these summaries, both *Sultana’s Dream* and *The Power* speculate about a future run by women; however, they only end up demonstrating the limitations of a society divided by gender as will be seen in this paper through the analysis of the concept of a feminist utopia, the connection between religion and patriarchy, and the corrupting nature of power.

2. THE CONCEPT OF A FEMINIST UTOPIA

From Wonder Woman to Shulamith Firestone to Joanna Russ, the idea of a feminist utopia where societies are run by women or are absent of gender altogether has existed for almost a century (Berlatsky, 2013). Women have always longed for a world where their destiny is not determined by their gender. The works that express this desire belong to the genre of Feminist Utopian writings, a type of social science fiction (Napikoski, 2018). They comment on the contemporary patriarchal society by imagining something new, something better to replace it. In this new, better world, nobody has to be confined to traditional gender ideals. As Napikoski (2018) explains, there was a great increase in feminist utopian literature during the second-wave feminism of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. The more modern works have explored feminist dystopias more than utopias; however, some authors have kept the trend alive in works that explore the effects of giving women the power rather than taking it away from them.

Sally Gearhart (1984) identifies a feminist utopia by four points. Firstly, it must be an idealised place in contrast to present times. Secondly, it must offer a critique of present-day values or conditions. These first two conditions can be considered the definition of utopia, which was derived from two Greek terms, both “good place” and “no place.” Thirdly, the feminist utopia must identify men or male institutions as the principal causes of contemporary social issues. Lastly, women must be shown as not only equal to men, but with full possession of reproduction (p. 296–310). The two chosen works fulfil these requirements. The world in Alderman’s *The Power* cannot be called an idealized place as it does portray some of the issues that still exist in society, but strictly from a woman’s point of view, it is an idealized place because the women do not have to live in constant fear. They no longer have to feel helpless in ‘a man’s world’. However, some other factors need to be considered before proposing feminist utopias as the solution.

From the plot of the two chosen works, it can be seen that feminist utopias crumble easily if we try to merge them

with the current society. That's why the feminist utopias that subvert the existing structures seem to rely upon the narrative devices of some sort of natural calamity, supernatural element, or a dream. These are 'overlay' feminist utopias. 'Overlay' is one type of archetype for city building in feminist utopias, proposed by Leone Drapeaud (n.d.). Overlay utopias demonstrate matriarchy overturning patriarchy. The story *Sultana's Dream* and *The Power* both are 'overlay' feminist utopias. The women's moves to push men into purdah and use electrical power to force them into silence and submission are characteristic of these types of feminist utopias. While all such archetypes have their flaws, 'overlay' utopias portrayed in the two chosen works stand as a deterrent against believing in feminist utopias as means to better future. At their core, the works seem to have understood this as the genesis for these feminist utopias lies in the events that are not likely to be replicated in reality. This then forces us to question the purpose of feminist utopian writings.

In the end, the discussion of any feminist utopia boils down to this: What is freedom? How this can be manifested not only for women, but for all humans? After all, patriarchy doesn't just hurt women. It hurts men by prohibiting them to embrace their emotional self; it hurts marginalized groups such as LGBTQ+ communities. A lot of feminist utopias, in the end, become inseparable from just a utopia. After all, an ideal feminist work does not aim to create a society where men are treated as second class, only one where women are not treated so. As matriarchy again leads to a power imbalance, it cannot be the answer to solve humanity's problems, as seen by the events that take place in feminist utopias in both the chosen works.

3. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN RELIGION AND PATRIARCHY

Both *The Power* and *Sultana's Dream* have a religious aspect in them that highlights the effects of a reverse-power structure. When the ability starts to manifest in women in *The Power*, oppressed women assume that divine intervention has saved them from their previous existence, and a new religious leader is ready and waiting to feminise faith. Allie discovers how to use her powers to heal and becomes an influential religious leader, propagating a matriarchal doctrine. She reinvents herself as Mother Eve, redirecting the centres of the world's largest religions by saying, "Jews look to Miriam, not Moses. Muslims: look to Fatima, not Muhammad. Buddhists: remember Tara, the mother of liberation. Christians: pray to Mary for your salvation" (Alderman, 2016). As Garrett (2017) describes, "Mother Eve's message is popular: women create and it is this ability that is the true sign of power. With Roxy's help, Eve then builds a powerful Christian organisation powered by mafia money that believes in the idea of female supremacy. Through this, we can see the reversal of the power structure in the society as well as the relationship between power and religion. As this new religion expands fast via social media, the rise of a matriarchal society occurs with it. Alderman tries to show how people in power use religion to spread their views, to gain even more power and use it to their own advantage. This is seen in how Allie uses her power to heal, to create a vast empire that imposes the same mistreatment on men that women currently suffer through.

Similarly, in *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya shows religion as a way for people in power to control those who have less power. In another scenario of a reversed society, women are in power and men are made to sit at home. It is imagined Ladyland where women seem to have access to public spaces without being restricted by social or religious customs. Now, men sit in seclusion while women have free access to everything. While *Sultana's Dream* portrays more of a utopia than *The Power*, the aspect of religion is integrated in a similar manner. When the protagonist of *Sultana's Dream* inquires about the religion of Ladyland, Sister Sara explains: "Our religion is based on Love and Truth" (Hossain, 1905). This also brings in the aspect of religion being a source of oppression in our current society, buying into the idea that women

want to or have to give up wearing a burkha/ religion as a whole to be free. Moreover, the story seems to bring in the idea of science vs. religion as the women overthrow the men ruling the nation via a revolution based on scientific achievements and political manoeuvres. Before the revolution, the Lady Principal's scientific research is dismissed by men as "sentimental nightmare" for its focus on solving social problems rather than enhancing the state's military power (Lewton, 2019). As observed by Lewton (2019), feminist critiques point out how the relationship between science and power has always been one of the consequences of the historical male-domination of the sciences and women's exclusion from the discipline, both as practitioners and as overlooked subjects of inquiry. In Lady land, under the leadership of the Lady Principal, mosquito bites and disease epidemics are non-existent. Hard labour is the job of electric machines; the streets are lush gardens, and laboratory work is completed in only two hours each day. Hence, in the utopia of *Sultana's Dream*, science is used as a tool of power while religion is completely broken down to the two factors of Love and Truth.

Thus, from the two chosen works, it can be seen that religion acts as one of the pillars of oppressive power structures. This then demonstrates one of the primary obstacles in accepting matriarchy as the answer to current issues. Matriarchal structures seem to fail in eradicating toxic elements of religion, opting to keep them intact to preserve power. However, there are still lessons to be learned from analysis of religious structures in feminist utopian writings. For instance, one solution relates to the role of education. Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) states that education leads to freedom from oppression and it are a tool for women to gain power "over themselves." This is seen in *Sultana's Dream* via how the Queen makes sure that all girls and women receive education and go to university, which finally leads to the female utopia. This shows that education can be used by women as a tool to bring about better future. Therefore, promotion of education should replace the promotion of patriarchy in feminist agenda while implications of connection between religion and oppressive power structures need to be considered realistically.

4. THE CORRUPTING NATURE OF POWER

So after having analysed everything, one must question by him or herself - can 'Ladyland' exist in reality? Of course, not! Men and women, all power dynamics and imbalance aside, are complementary. One needs both to exist. For instance, going by the titles 'patriarchy' and 'matriarchy', one wouldn't even have them without there being the other gender. This brings one to the next question - is 'Ladyland' or a matriarchal set-up a solution to all vices of humanity? Dominance of either men or women leads to power imbalance and thus oppression. There are many issues in the world like income inequality, crime, injustice, and war. There is also the lack of understanding that causes a gap between the two sexes. Such issues will always be there, even in a matriarchal set-up. Now comes the final question - does absolute power corrupt absolutely? In *Sultana's Dream*, wars suddenly end upon women coming into power, but are that realistic? The aforementioned issues wouldn't suddenly end just because of women coming into power. We can further answer this question by looking to *The Power*, where the women use their electrical power to do things like abuse men, silence them during debates, and the murder of men in a mass killing. Be it in the hands of men or women, absolute power does corrupt, as 1st Baron Acton said, absolutely (Wikipedia). Thus, we can see that the situation is no better, just that the shoe is on the other foot.

5. CONCLUSIONS

So, as we can see, matriarchy does not liberate women from trappings of patriarchy. Instead of following the path of Overlay feminist utopia, the more a feminist utopia approaches just a utopia, the better it'll be for all of us because reversal

of power does not end evils of power. So, shall women withdraw and start anew in Charlotte Perkin Gilman's "Herland"? No, it is the world that needs to be changed, and it needs women to change it from the inside. To do that, women need to imagine better solutions and believe they can work. The quest for utopian society need not be abandoned. After all, forfeiting utopian thinking is akin to forfeiting one's future (McKenna, 2001). What is humanity without its aspirations for the better future? A better world cannot be created without utopian thinking. So, we need the stories to continue portraying the worlds where women run things, where matriarchy is the magical solution to problems of patriarchy. These might appear extremist from outside, but they perform an important role in taking forward the feminist ideology by telling us what might not be the answer. Matriarchy as a manifestation of Overlay feminist utopia is not the answer and not only because it keeps intact the current power structures, but also because it keeps perpetrating the idea that when it comes to power, the only possibility is the binary of powerful and oppressed. To get to the future where equality reigns, we need to promote education, freedom, financial independence, not matriarchy. Only then we will be able to transform the current society into a utopian one.

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